

RESOURCE SHEET 40

The Story of the Dormition of the Theotokos

We have reviewed many events in the life of the Theotokos over the past three weeks. We know how much her divine Son Jesus loved her. We've read about His instructions to John to take care of Mary as his own mother. After Jesus died, rose, and ascended to heaven, Mary stayed in John's house near Jerusalem. She spent her days helping the poor and those in need. She also encouraged all the apostles in the work Jesus had given them to do. She was a "mother" to all of them. Many hours of Mary's days were spent in prayer and worship. She often went alone to the Mount of Olives to pray, just as her Son had done. As she prayed, she remembered the wonderful miracles and healings that He had performed for people. Besides her prayers alone, Mary also prayed with the apostles and all those who loved Jesus. She was an example to everyone. In her, people could see what it meant to love God and follow His commandments. And in her they could see the joy that comes from being close to Him. One day as Mary was praying at the Mount of Olives, an angel told her that she would die soon. (We know that many saints have had the great gift of knowing when they would die. This gives them time to prepare for their death, and to make themselves ready to meet God.) So when Mary heard the angel's words she was not sad or afraid. She wanted to be with God. She was ready to see the face of her Son again. Mary went home to John's house and made preparations for her funeral. She asked John to make sure she would be buried in Gethsemane, near the Mount of Olives. This was the place where her parents, Joachim and Anna, were buried. It was also the place where Joseph was buried. (Today there is a beautiful church built near the four graves.) As Mary lay dying peacefully, the apostles gathered around her. Only Thomas, who was very far away at the time, was not there. The others wept with sorrow because they would not have Mary with them. Yet they felt peace and joy, because she herself was full of peace and joy. She blessed each one of them, and told them to continue their work with courage and strength. As she died, the apostles heard angels singing. They saw a radiant light cover her face, and smelled a sweet fragrance coming from her body. The apostles carried Mary's body on a platform, sometimes called a funeral bier, toward Gethsemane. As they went along, the crowds followed them and sang holy songs as they carried candles. Mary was laid to rest in a tomb at Gethsemane, just as she had asked to be. We said that the apostle Thomas was not with the others when Mary died. He was preaching the Gospel in India at that time. When he heard that the beloved Theotokos was dying, he rushed to get back to be with her and with his brother apostles. But by the time he got back, Mary was already dead and in the tomb. Thomas was filled with grief. He asked the other apostles to let him see and say goodbye to the "mother" he had loved very much. So, together, the apostles opened the tomb. They were amazed to find that Mary's body was not there. There were only the cloths her body had been wrapped in, and the same lovely fragrance that had come from her body when she died. The apostles prayed that God would show them where Mary's body had been taken. As they prayed, they saw a vision of Mary in heaven, surrounded by angels. They thanked God with great joy. Now they knew that Mary was once again with her Son. Even though Mary died like any other human person, she did not stay in the grave as all other human beings do. Her Son took her to share everlasting life now. That's why we call her death a "dormition" or "falling asleep"--because it did not last for a long time, as most human death does. We rejoice in Mary's presence in the Kingdom with Christ. She is the first to be part of His promise that all His beloved people--all of us--can share that life, too.